

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Signing an Executive Order on Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All

April 21, 2023

The President. Well, thank you, thank you, Catherine. I appreciate that very much. And I'm sure you all love sitting in the sun here. *[Laughter]* But it could be worse; it could be raining. It's a beautiful day, as that old phrase used to go, "a beautiful day in the neighborhood."

It is beautiful. Excuse me, I'm putting on my sunglasses—*[laughter]*—so I can see.

Audience members. Woo!

The President. All right. *[Applause]* As I've told my distinguished friend from Massachusetts and good friend, Senator Markey, that it's really very, very dull when, after all these years in public life, you're known for two things: Ray-Ban sunglasses and chocolate-chip ice cream. *[Laughter]* A very dull President.

But look, you're a great leader, Catherine. I really mean it. And just named the most—you were named one of the Most Influential People of the year in TIME magazine. Being a grandparent second time around, that's the best of the jobs. Right? Yes, well—look, congratulations to your granddaughter. She's going to be looking up to you for a long time.

And I thank everyone for joining us here today. EPA Administrator Regan, who's done a hell of—heck of a job for us for a long time. And I kid her all the time: Had she been born in the United States instead of Canada, she'd be the President standing here. Jennifer Granholm, my Secretary of—you're doing a great job, Jennifer.

And the Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Brenda Malloy—where—where's—Mallory. There she is. Brenda.

Members of Congress who work on this issue every day are champions of environmental justice. Let's get something straight: None of this would have happened without you guys. And that's a fact. None of it would happen without you guys.

Look, stand up. And I want the—a war hero is not going to be able to stand up because she's in a wheelchair. But, everybody else, please stand up.

And I'd also want to mention a Member who can't be here today: Congressman—an old friend—Don McEachin. A lifelong fighter for environmental justice. And he fought like hell for every one of the things we're going to talk about today.

I wanted to thank all of you advocates and community leaders, including members of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council, many of whom have been working on the issue for a long time and persuading those in power to pay attention—pay attention—to make this a priority to care.

Look, what—you know, what you do matters. It matters a great deal. And I ask all of you on the Council to stand up and be recognized. Some couldn't be here today. I mean it. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Earth Day is tomorrow, a chance to reflect on the national wonders of our Nation and our planet. But we have to do a great deal more than just reflect. We have to commit ourselves to action. Will we step up to our ambitions? Will we stand together to meet the great challenges we have? Will we preserve our planet for future generations?

History is going to judge us by how we answer these questions. And that's not hyperbole; that's a fact. And today I hope the answer is going to be a loud and clear "yes." Yes, we're committed to following the science. Yes, we're determined to strengthen the ambitions—our ambitions and actions. And yes, we will include communities that have been denied basic security, basic dignity that comes from clean air—having clean air, clean water, clean energy jobs, and environmental justice.

And, folks, like you, environmental issues have been close to my heart for a long time.

You know, it was one of the first people to introduce a climate bill—I did—back in 1986. Part of the—[*applause*]. No, no, it was because I grew up—and maybe there's one Delawarean here who knows where Claymont, Delaware, is. I grew up in——

Audience members. Woo!

The President. Oh, all right. [*Laughter*]

Well, I grew up in Claymont, Delaware, which is just on the Pennsylvania line. At the time I was growing up there in an area called Brookview Apartments, there were more oil refineries in that neck of the woods, in that southeast corner of Pennsylvania than in Houston, Texas.

And I went to school about a half—quarter-mile—a mile up the road on a thing called the Philadelphia Pike. And Mom used to drive us up, because it was a very busy highway, and would drop us off. And on those days early on when there'd be the first frost, you'd turn on the windshield wipers—not a joke—and there'd be an oil slick on the window. Literally, an oil slick on the front windshield.

And how many folks across the country have had similar experiences? You know, we know public health impacts of toxins in air and water. And there's real—real—effects. Listen, I think it's one of the reasons I had childhood asthma. So many people in that area—we had one of the highest cancer rates in the Nation in that part of Delaware for the longest time.

And that's why, when I was running for President, I made it a priority to meet with the environmental—with the environmental justice leaders. And I remember one conversation we had in the summer of 2020. Their stories were unforgettable. People living near factories, seeing the paint on their cars literally peel off because the air was so corrosive. Imagine being a parent scared to death about what the air and rain was going to do to your kids.

Landfills and garbage incinerators located right in the middle of communities. Drinking water contaminated by radon and arsenic. This kind of inequity and injustice goes against everything we stand for as a nation, but it continues to exist.

So, when I was elected President with Kamala and her partnership, we vowed to take action on the most ambitious climate and environmental justice agenda in American history. And that's exactly what we did, with your support.

On day one of my Presidency, we reentered the Paris Agreement, because the United States should lead the world in fighting the climate crisis. Yesterday I convened a major economic forum on Zoom, comprised of the world's leaders—leading emitters to accelerate progress and help poorer countries and communities deal with the impacts of climate change.

And I announced that I'm going to ask Congress for \$500 million to protect the Amazon [from; White House correction] deforestation and get other countries to do the same. It's an irreplaceable resource that the whole planet depends on.

But to lead the world, we have to start here at home. My first week as President, I signed an Executive order directing my administration to take sweeping action to tackle the climate crisis.

We set a historic goal to direct 40 percent—to—excuse me—direct 40 percent of the overall benefits of all Federal investment in climate change—to clean air, clean water, clean transit, and more—to communities that are disproportionately impacted by the environmental degradation. And, with your support, we're living up to that pledge through our Just 4—Justice40 Initiative.

We passed the bipartisan infrastructure law to modernize our roads, bridges, ports, airports, and so much more; replacing every single lead pipe in America because we think everyone should be able to turn on a faucet—at home or at the 400,000 schools—and drink clean water.

We're helping school districts across the country electrify their school buses so kids don't have to breathe polluted air from diesel exhaust.

Across Appalachia and the Great Plains, we're plugging the so-called orphaned wells, which emit methane, which is significantly more dangerous and toxic than anything else that comes out of the ground, more dangerous gases poisoning air and water in rural communities.

We're delivering clean water and clean sanitation to millions of families. And we're cleaning up toxic pollution, including brownfields and Superfund sites, which have been a blight on communities for decades.

The Vice President wanted to be here today, but she's in Florida announcing investments we're making to strengthen the infrastructure in coastal areas that are vulnerable to storms.

But together—together—we passed the Inflation Reduction Act, which makes the most significant investment in dealing with climate change ever, anywhere in the history of the world, literally, not figuratively: a \$370 billion investment which will reduce annual carbon emissions by 1 billion tons in 230—2030.

And, folks, for example, it offers working families \$1,000 a year in savings by providing rebates for—to buy new, efficient appliances; weatherize their homes; get tax credits for purchasing heat pumps and rooftop solar, energy-efficient ovens, dryers, and so much more.

It provides tax credits for electric vehicles, new and used, because we're convinced—we convinced the auto companies on this lawn out here, a year and a half ago, to move to all-electric vehicles in the near term. It's a gigantic gamechanger.

And that's not all. The Inflation Reduction Act also is the most significant law in U.S. history when it comes to environmental justice.

Here's just one example: air pollution around ports. Folks who live near ports know air pollution can be extreme, because all trucks and all the vehicles moving goods in and out of ports and on the backs of ships are polluting the air significantly.

Well, the Inflation Reduction Act includes major investments in adopting clean heavy-duty trucks and clean port equipment. And folks, it's going to take—make a real difference for families who live near those ports.

We're investing—[*applause*]. We're investing in air quality sensors in communities near factories so people who live near them can know that the risk is and how safe the air is. Because we know historically red-lined communities are literally hotter because there's more pavement, fewer trees—so we're planting millions of new trees to cool down our city streets.

And we're also making major investments in clean energy in disadvantaged communities to lower energy costs and create good-paying jobs. Brenda was recently in Houston, where we're building a solar farm on the site of a former landfill, right in the middle of a neighborhood, another example of what's good for the environment is also good for jobs. Brenda, thank you.

And this—these are the kinds of projects we're funding all across the country in urban, rural, and suburban and Tribal communities.

And then, last year, Jill and I reignited the Cancer Moonshot to end cancer as we know it. It's a whole-of-Government effort and one of our top priorities to better understand and prevent environmental and toxic exposures. If we do that, we know—we know—we can save and extend millions of lives.

Look, this is about people's health. It's about the health of our communities. It's ultimately about the future of our planet.

Just since I've become President, I've flown over literally thousands of acres of land burned flat by wildfires because of environmental changes, more acreage burned to the ground that I've witnessed from a helicopter in the last 19 months than are in the entire State of Maryland. It's as if the entire State of Maryland burned to the ground.

I've seen too many communities turned to rubble by storms that are growing more frequent and ferocious. And it's an existential threat to our Nation and literally to the world.

I wish I could say that everyone saw it that way. But just this past week, we heard Speaker McCarthy and the MAGA—this is not your father's Republican Party—and the MAGA Republicans in Congress want to repeal climate provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act. They'd rather threaten to default on the U.S. economy than get rid—or get rid of some \$30 billion in taxpayer subsidies—rather than get rid of \$30 billion taxpayer subsidies to an oil industry that made \$200 billion last year.

Imagine making that choice. Imagine seeing all this happen—the wildfires, the storms, the floods—and doing nothing about it, nothing about it. Imagine taking all these clean energy jobs away from working class folks all across America. Imagine turning your back on all those moms and dads living in towns poisoned by pollution and telling them, "Sorry, you're on your own."

We can't let that happen. I mean we really can't let that happen. That's why this Executive order, in my view, is so important. And here are some of the things this Executive order will do. Under this order, environmental justice will become the responsibility of every single Federal agency. I mean every single Federal agency.

That means every Federal agency must take into account environmental and health impacts on communities and the work to prevent those negative impacts. Environmental justice will be the mission of the entire Government, woven directly into how we work with State, local, Tribal, and Territorial governments.

This is an order that directs the Federal agencies to address gaps in science and technology. For example, there's a lot we still don't know about the quality of people's wastewater or the air they're breathing. There's still a lot we don't know about the cumulative impacts of pollution on people's health. We need to learn more so we can serve those communities better and help the world overall.

And this Executive order—[*applause*]. This Executive order creates a new Office of Environmental Justice and a new role for the Chief Environmental Justice Officer. They're going to coordinate—[*applause*]*—they will coordinate all our efforts across government to make sure we're delivering the greatest possible benefits to people's lives.*

This Executive order honors and builds on decades of work, including by many of you who are here today, in the private as well as public sector. Two years—in 2 years, we're making real progress with the most ambitious environmental justice agenda in history. And, with this Executive order, we'll go even further.

Let me close with a story. Last January, the Vice President [and I; White House correction] went to Atlanta to speak to a group of four Historical Black Colleges and Universities about voting rights. And the—and on the flight home, I read an article about the crisis in Lowndes County—we just heard about—Alabama, just outside of Selma, where more than 40 percent of the major Black residents—a majority-Black residents lack access to clean sanitation systems. Forty percent.

The article described a local leader who said: "Without Federal intervention, we would have never had voting rights. And without Federal interventions, we will never have sanitation equality either."

Well, I immediately called my team and said, "Make sure help gets down on the ground to these folks." And a few months later, Administrator Regan and Secretary Vilsack were—and my Infrastructure Coordinator, Mitch Landrieu—were down in Alabama announcing a new intensive initiative to ensure that the poorest communities in America have access to clean, functioning wastewater systems.

And, folks, the local leader who I just quoted is also the one who introduced me: Catherine. Thank you, Catherine.

A few months later, I went down to Selma and walked across the bridge to mark the 58th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Not—several times I've done that. A march for the right to vote, but also for all the rights that flow from the right to vote, including the right to breathe clean air, to drink clean water, and to be treated with dignity.

To all of you: We're making progress, but there's much more to do to finish the job. We just have to remember who we are. We're the United States of America. And there's nothing beyond our capacity if we work together, and we're—like all the people on this South—on this lawn have done.

May God bless you all. Keep it up.

Now I'm going to sign this Executive order, and we're going to get to work. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

We've got some folks coming up, don't we?

[At this point, the President moved to the signing table.]

The desk is hot. *[Laughter]*

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*—Mr. President. *[Laughter]*

The President. Come on, team.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael S. Regan. Thank you so much, sir.

The President. Thank you, man.

Come on up, folks. And thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Come on. Slide in here.

The desk is hot. The pen is hot. Everyone is—*[laughter]*. "Executive Order—Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All."

[The President signed the Executive order.]

Audience member. Great day.

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:26 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Catherine Coleman Flowers, founder, Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice, who introduced the President; and Sen. L. Tammy Duckworth.

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